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THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Saturday, July 2, 2005



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ENVIRONMENT

Derelict gill nets targeted

Old gear seen as threat to ships, sea life



MAME BURNS THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers crew hoists a 600-foot fishing

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net up to the deck of their boat.

KATIE N. JOHANNES
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Like angry undersea phantoms, deserted nets continue to entangle marine life, snarl ship propellers and snare divers for years after the gear has broken free from fishing boats.



A diver from the state Department of Natural Resources heads into Semiahmoo Bay, searching for abandoned fishing gear. MAME BURNS THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

north to the Canadian border.

After 40 days of working to remove nets for the conservation group Northwest Straits Commission, Jeff June figures he has looked at only 1 percent of Puget Sound.

"We've found 263 separate gill nets on 73 acres of seabed," he said.

This week, divers recovered a 600-foot-long gillnet from the bottom of Semiahmoo Bay. Entangled in the net were a sea lion, three harbor seals, evidence of at least 90 sea birds and countless fish - all dead, June said.

What divers find in the nets is only a snapshot of what the nets capture and kill.

Below the nets is a graveyard of fish and bird bones, picked clean by crabs and other scavengers. Increased awareness of the problem has prompted action by conservation groups, state agencies and the

"They're designed to not be seen in the water, and not to rip, to help catch fish. But that's also what makes it hazardous," said Chris Craven, advertising director for LFS Marine and Outdoor in Bellingham.

U.S. Navy divers were in the waters off Blaine this week, learning techniques from the state Department of Natural Resources for retrieving lost or abandoned gear. They are part of a multiagency effort to find and remove gear, and research the extent of the problem.

And the nets seem to be everywhere in Puget Sound, stretching

REPORTING DERELICT GEAR

- To report derelict fishing gear, call the state Department of Fish and Wildlife hot line at (800) 477-6224, or use the online report form at www.wdfw.wa.gov/fish/derelict. Scroll down to the red report form link.

- More information about the derelict fishing gear removal program is available online at www.wdfw.wa.gov, or www.nwstraits.org.

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federal government. The more work they do, the more derelict gear they find.

June's Seattle-based company Natural Resources Consultants has a contract for derelict gear cleanup with the Northwest Straits Commission. The group has been removing gear - which includes nets, and crab and shrimp pots - since October 2001, according to the group's Web site.

With federal funding this year, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has paid to develop and test protocols for removing derelict gear.

Divers with the state Department of Natural Resources learned techniques for recovering the nets from commercial divers who encounter them while harvesting geoducks, sea cucumbers and urchins, June said.

This week, DNR divers passed on their knowledge to U.S. Navy divers in the Puget Sound and Whatcom County region. That's because civilian divers don't have access to waterways near military installments.

"Navy divers encounter the gear often, usually during inspections on ships and subs," said Senior Chief Boy Kayona, a master diver from the Navy base on Whidbey Island.

The nets often wind their way around the propellers of military ships, potentially inhibiting their ability to steer.

This year, NOAA's focus is transferring training from the state to the federal level. In three years, the hope is to take that knowledge across the country, said Holly Bamford, program manager for NOAA's marine debris program.

"The unique thing about Puget Sound is that it's a relatively low-energy body of water," June said. "There are lots of nets out here and they're not going anywhere."

In the open ocean, the invisible nets roll around until they snag something, said Will Nuckols of Coastal America, an arm of the federal government that oversees a number ocean and coastal agencies.

"They're like monofilament tumbleweed."

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